

Deportations and Harassment of Irish Group Traveling to West Bank

A trip to Palestine resulted in deportations and harassment by security as the Israel authorities step up attempts to intimidate or frighten future travelers to the area. During our trip we experienced CS gas, checkpoints, apartheid in action and military harassment of Palestinians. Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin relates his experiences as a member of the group.

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Departure

I joined the group in Dublin airport on the morning of September 8th and we flew out to Istanbul where we waited in a transit area cafe for a couple of hours. As it turned out our flight departure lounge for Tel Aviv was next to the cafe where we were sitting and we noticed that an extra layer of security was being prepared by ground staff for the Tel Aviv flight. After boarding, and a smooth Turkish Airlines flight to Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, we disembarked and queued up for passport control. I was on my own and after 2 or 3 questions (what was the purpose of my trip, had I been to Israel before, etc). I was given a one month visa and waved through.

Meanwhile, however, trouble was brewing as I could hear the two Irish girls at the kiosk next to me being asked to bring the group leader over. I went directly through to the arrivals hall as I had not checked in any bags. Then began a long wait as myself and the few who got through unhindered discovered that security had rounded up as many of the group as they could find including those who had decided to wait in the luggage hall rather than in the arrivals hall. In all 21 were detained and 6 questioned, and of those 4 were deported (Elaine Daly, Fidelma Bonass, Joan Nolan and Stephen McCloskey) a few hours later. The four who were detained were informed that they were being deported to prevent 'illegal immigration' even though they had valid passports and return tickets. Around 4am the others were released and we finally boarded the bus and made the journey to our hotel in Bethlehem.



West Bank wall and turnstiles

Fact Finding Program

Our tour, though coordinated in Dublin, was organised by the Siraj Centre, a non-profit organization licensed by the Ministry of Tourism and based in Palestine. Our Fact Finding Program included meetings with prominent peace activists, political officials, human rights organizations, settlers and Jewish tour guides. This makes the deportation of our group leader, Elaine Daly, even stranger as she has been organising trips with the Siraj Centre every year from Ireland since 2006.

Sat 9th Sept: Day 1 Bethlehem

On our first morning we attended a talk by Prof. Mazin Qumsiyeh, a local university professor and activist, at the Natural History institute who emphasised the strong link between biodiversity, political struggle for the land and its safeguarding for future generations. It was interesting to note that it had been his son who had first drawn the infamous 'shrinking' map of the Palestinian territories showing their loss of land from 1946, 1947, 1967 to the 2000s.



Entrance to Aida refugee camp

CS gas

Afterwards we headed over to the Lajee Center, a cultural centre beside the main Palestinian refugee camp in Bethlehem for a talk and a traditional dance display from the local children. Soon however they switched off the air-conditioning and when we asked why we were told that tear gas was coming through the system. Directly outside the window local youth were throwing stones at the Israeli army at the far end of the road. Soon more and more tear gas came into the building and the windows and doors were shut. For most on the tour it was their first experience of the burning effects of CS gas yet for the members of the Lajee Center it had become merely a nuisance. After about a half hour we were able to leave and go for a short tour of the area. We passed under the arch of Aida camp with a giant key symbolising the principle that Palestinian refugees, both first-generation refugees and their descendants have a right to return. On our left were simple concrete buildings while on the right the street is cut off from Jerusalem by the Israeli West Bank wall and covered in murals and graffiti.



Wall mural, Aida refugee camp

Sun 10th Sept: Day 2 Hebron

The next day on the way to Hebron we stopped off at a small park beside a main road containing the tomb of Baruch Goldstein, the religious extremist who carried out the 1994 Cave of the Patriarchs massacre in Hebron. Goldstein killed 29 Palestinian Muslim worshippers and wounded another 125. He was then overpowered and beaten to death by the survivors. Goldstein was not allowed to be buried in a Jewish cemetery but his current burial site still attracts Jewish extremists. We drove on to the Cave of Patriarchs or Ibrahimi Mosque where the Goldstein massacre took place. There are now two separate entrances, one for Muslims and one for Jews, both of which we were able to enter. This building is over 2,000 years old is believed to be the oldest continuously used prayer structure in the world. However, it was outside the Mosque at the military checkpoints we witnessed Israeli apartheid for the first time. Palestinians are barred from the using the street and our guide was apprehended by two soldiers. Our group complained to the soldiers but only our guide responded saying he would get a taxi and meet us elsewhere. In the end, the group spontaneously applauded our guide for his patience and perseverance as he was removed from the area. Our waiting bus had only been 50 metres around the corner...



Ibrahimi Mosque, Hebron

We walked through streets of Hebron going through different stages of clearance. In some places only a few Palestinians were left in the old stone buildings and Israeli street signs had been erected pointing to Jewish places of interest. In other streets nets had been used to stop settlers throwing objects on the shoppers below. Afterwards we were brought to meet with a settler where some asked questions about the settlements and their legality but this ended up with some storming out and others realising how easy it was to become an Israeli citizen and participate in the land confiscations.

Mon 11th Sept: Day 3 Jerusalem

Our guides were Palestinian and Jewish and both were equally as good when it came to explanations and answering questions from our group. As we drove through East Jerusalem it was pointed out by our Jewish guide that Palestinians pay taxes yet their areas had bad roads and poor rubbish collection services.

Tues 12th Sept: Day 4 Nablus

In Nablus we visited Jacobs Well Church, and then to Balata Camp to meet with a representative from the Yafa cultural Center. The centre was set up in 1996 by the Committee for the Defence of Refugee Rights and offers a range of educational and creative programs to camp residents. We were brought around the closely-built neighbourhoods of the camp where some 'streets' were less than one metre wide. After lunch we had a tour in the old city of Nablus and visited the Samaritans Museum. The bustling old city gave us a feel for what many areas should have looked like and felt like without occupation.



Yafa cultural Center, Nablus

Wed 13th Sept: Day 5 Ramalah

We began the day driving to Ramalah to meet with a speaker from Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions ([BDS](#)). BDS has become an extensive movement against Israeli apartheid and settler-colonialism. It is also a Palestinian-led movement made up of unions, academic associations, churches and grassroots movements across the world. We also met with a representative from Al Haq, an independent Palestinian non-governmental human rights organisation also based in [Ramallah](#). According to their website: 'Al-Haq documents violations of the individual and collective rights of Palestinians in the OPT, irrespective of the identity of the perpetrator, and seeks to end such breaches by way of advocacy before national and international mechanisms and by holding the violators accountable.' In the afternoon the group were brought on a sightseeing tour of Jerusalem which I did not participate in due to feeling unwell. Instead, I went with our Palestinian tour guide back to Bethlehem on the public bus instead. As the bus approached the wall we all had get off and pass through the many turnstiles and barricaded-off pathways to get to the other side of the wall. The queues moved quickly enough as the military generally do not carry out checks on Palestinians going home to the West Bank from Jerusalem in the evening. It is in the early morning that the long queues form as workers are stopped and permits scrutinised on the way to work in Jerusalem.



Old City, Nablus

Thurs 14th Sept: Day 5 Bethlehem

The next day I went back to Jerusalem from Bethlehem on public bus No. 231. At a major checkpoint a male and female soldier got on the bus while about a third of the bus got off to have their permits checked outside. They questioned a Palestinian woman with children for about ten minutes on the bus before suddenly leaving the bus again and letting the others back on. These checks, the roadworks and traffic jams into Jerusalem added up to about 30 minutes onto our journey, a journey which should have taken only around 20 minutes. In the centre I crossed the road and entered into the Old City through Herod's Gate. I headed through the old city markets to the Al-Aqsa Mosque but at various Israeli military check points I was stopped and informed that the Mosque was only open in the mornings. There were 4 or 5 groups of about 20 Israeli soldiers each walking and singing down the narrow streets towards the Western Wall. The area was being prepared for a swearing-in ceremony for Paratrooper recruits taking place that evening. After walking the Via Dolorosa and around to the Damascus Gate I got the bus back to Bethlehem. Later, after dinner with the group in a Palestinian restaurant in Bethlehem, a few of us took a taxi to visit the Banksy's Walled Off Hotel about ten minutes drive away. The 'Walled Off' sits beside the massive wall which is covered in graffiti executed in many styles by various artists. Boasting the 'worst view in the world' the lobby contains a collection of art and there is a museum upstairs. People sat outside on the veranda between the hotel and the wall having a quiet drink in this most incongruous of places.



Mural near 'Walled Off' hotel

Fri 15th Sept: The Dead Sea

For our last day the group decided to visit the Dead Sea. After arriving at the resort, getting to the water's edge meant walking down layer after layer of beaches as the Dead Sea evaporates. The recession of the water's edge is believed to be about 1 m (3 ft) a year. The speed and breadth of the recession of the Dead Sea was a fitting symbol for the recession of the West Bank itself as more and more settlements and walls reduce further the size of the Palestinian territories.

Early the next morning we were back on the bus to Tel Aviv and Ben Gurion airport where there was some anxiety as the security checks were known to be more stringent in the departures area than in arrivals area. (Why? a form of damage limitation?) Once again our group was held up to the last minute for our flight to Istanbul. We had a much more pleasant time in Dublin airport where a welcoming committee was waiting for us with a Palestinian flag. Elaine and the other deportees had decided to hold off publicising the deportations so as not to create any unnecessary difficulties for the rest of the group's departure from Tel Aviv. Of course, our problems were nothing compared to the daily experiences and hardships of the Palestinian people being forced through turnstiles, having to obtain multivaried permits, losing land and dwellings, enduring constant military checks and an oppressive political/legal system (like the 17C Penal Laws in Ireland) all because of a particular nationality or religion. The trip left an indelible impression on us as individuals and as a group which would not be easily removed by the self-serving rhetoric of an all-powerful occupying force.

Since our return the issue of the deportations has been raised in various articles in the national newspapers. It has also been brought up during question time in the Dáil (the Irish parliament). Despite not being able to return to the West Bank again, Elaine is already planning to organise two trips to the West Bank from Dublin for 2018. All aboard!

Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin is an Irish artist, lecturer and writer. His [artwork](#) consists of paintings based on contemporary geopolitical themes as well as Irish history and cityscapes

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